

“Contentment”
Philippians 4:10-13
July 19, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning in our series in the book of Philippians.

Paul is nearing the end of his letter, and so he turns now to more personal matters – bringing up the gift of financial support that the Philippian church had sent to him.

With that said, let’s turn to our text: Philippians 4:10-13.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

¹⁰I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content. ¹²I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord,
When we think of the direction you give us through your word,
we take comfort.
Let your word be now our joy and delight,
as we attend to it here in your house,
so that we would remember it day and night,
that we might cling to it and follow it.
Give us that great blessing,
of walking in your ways, by the power of your Spirit
We ask, in Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:52, 54-56]

Introduction

As we come to this text, our focus will be on the last two and a half verses, but the first verse and a half gives some context.

In the first portion of the text, Paul gives thanks for the financial gift that the Philippians have sent him – a gift that would provide for him while he was in prison, because in the Roman system, prisoners were still responsible for their own basic needs. [Fee, 431 n.32]

So, Paul begins to express his thanks here. He recognizes that for some time the Philippians have not had an opportunity to express their concern for him, but now, as an opportunity has arrived, so has their gift, which is evidence of their care and concern. [Fee, 429]

Next, in verse 11, Paul says something that to us may seem strange. He seems to say that he didn't really need the gift. Now, to us, that can sound ungrateful – as if Paul is minimizing what they've done for him. But in Paul's culture, this was a way of stressing that his relationship with them is not utilitarian. Paul is saying "I want to be clear that what I really value in this gift is not the gift itself, but what it says about your love for me." He's saying that he views their friendship as the most important thing. [Fee, 425-427, 422 n.3]

But that explanation then leads Paul to share an important gospel truth with us. [Fee, 431] Because his claim that he didn't need the gift leads to the question: How that could be so? Paul is in prison. He doesn't have much financially. How could it be true that he was not in need? And that leads him to address the topic of contentment – which will be our focus this morning.

Paul says:

"I have learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

What I think we see here is that: Rather than looking to our circumstances or to ourselves for contentment, we must look to Christ for true contentment, both in need and in abundance.

Let me say that again: Rather than looking to our circumstances or to ourselves for contentment, we must look to Christ for true contentment, both in need and in abundance.

Let's break that down together.

Rather Than Looking to Our Circumstances for Contentment

First, Paul tells us here that we cannot look to our circumstances for true contentment.

In some ways, this should be obvious. Paul is writing from prison, but he says he can rejoice – he says he is content. It's not because he wants to be in prison. It's not because he's achieved his ideal circumstances for his life. If Paul is going to be content, it cannot be in his circumstances.

But he is content. And he wants to make it clear here that true contentment is not found in our circumstances. Instead, like him, we are called to learn to be content in whatever circumstances we are in.

Now ... most of us, especially if we're Christians ... we'd agree with this ... at least on paper. We're going to talk more a little later about the challenges in this – but many of us would agree, at least in principle.

But even as we do ... I think Christians are often tempted to use this very text to quietly and subtly undermine the very principle which this text establishes.

And here's how we do it. We start with noticing that we are not happy in a particular situation – we are not content.

And why aren't we happy?

Well, we think: "I'm not happy, because I want X, or I want to achieve Y, and I don't have it, and I feel like I won't be happy until I get it."

What we want might be an object. But it also might be a status or an achievement: A success, or even a promotion at work. A grade at school or an achievement in a school sport. Maybe we want to reach a certain level of financial independence, or to start a family, or to make our home look like an Instagram photo, or to make our kids look like an Instagram photo, or make our body look like an Instagram photo ... or some other goal. There's some goal we long for. It might be a good goal. Or it might not be. But either way, we want it. And we feel like we can't be happy or content until we achieve it.

And then some voice says to us: "Well, you know what? If that's what you want – if that's what you need to be happy, then you should go out there and get it. You should set your mind to it and achieve it. You got this. You can do it. Because, you know what? You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you!"

Now ... you see what we do there? We quote verse 13 in order to effectively contradict verses 11 and 12. Verses 11 and 12 are all about how sometimes we don't get what we want, and true contentment is about looking to Jesus for contentment, even when our circumstances are not what we want them to be.

But instead of accepting that, we twist verse 13 and try to make it say that we can achieve, we can have anything we want – anything that we think will make us happy – if we just believe in Jesus enough while we grasp at it. And that's how we can find our contentment – in getting what we want in the world, by believing extra hard in Jesus.

But that's not what Paul is saying here. Paul's point is not that we can achieve anything we want if we do it with Jesus. His point is that we can be content in any circumstance – including ones where we really don't get what we wanted – by looking to Jesus in those circumstances. His claim here is not that we can accomplish amazing things if we use the special technique of doing them "through" Christ. But Paul's actual main point here, is that we can face every circumstance

faithfully, and with contentment, because we are in Christ. [Fee, 434-435, 434 n.48, 434 n.50; O'Brien 526-527]

More than once, I've seen gym shirts with verse 13 written on them, maybe with an outline of a barbell with a bench press behind it. But Paul's point in verse 13 is not that you can finish that extra rep if you believe in Jesus enough. Paul's point is more that if you look to Jesus, you can learn to be content whether you are muscular and ripped ... or whether you are weak and out of shape – whether you look like the “before” picture in the workout ad, or the “after” picture, you can still find contentment in Jesus. That's closer to Paul's point.

Now, you may not use this verse for inspiration at the gym. But even so, I think we can all fall into the habit of thinking that if we are faithful to Jesus, then he will give us success in this world, and our circumstances will be what we want them to be, and that will make us content.

But that's not Paul's point here. Paul looked to Jesus more faithfully than most of us ever will. And Paul wrote these verses from a prison cell. Jesus had not given Paul worldly success in any sense of the world – Paul was not living his “best life now.” [Fee, 435]

The idols of the ancient world often offered worldly success in exchange for worship. But Yahweh, the God of the Bible, is very clear that he is not like those gods. He does not offer us an exchange of worldly success for our worship. Instead, he offers us something far greater.

Because, as Paul makes clear here, we cannot look to our circumstances for true contentment.

That's the first thing that Paul tells us here.

Rather Than Looking to Ourselves for Contentment

But next, Paul also makes it clear that we cannot look to ourselves for true contentment either.

Now, we can miss this point. But Paul is making it here.

And even worse than missing this, we can misread this verse actually saying the opposite of Paul's point. We can turn Paul's words here into a kind of Christianized “pick yourself up by your bootstraps” approach. We can use it to say “If you were really spiritual, if you really loved the Lord, then you could be spiritually self-reliant – then you wouldn't need good circumstances to make you feel okay, because you could will yourself to feel content.”

But again, that's not what Paul is saying here. Paul is not saying that he found the answer to true contentment in himself. What Paul is saying is that he found the answer in Jesus. And he's urging us to do the same.

Paul makes this point by alluding to popular views in the unbelieving world around him, but then adding a twist. The word Paul uses here for “content” is the same word that was used by Stoics in Paul's day to express their ultimate goal in life. For the Stoics, reaching this kind of “contentment” was all about being self-sufficient – finding in yourself what you need to be satisfied in life, regardless of your circumstances. Paul seems to evoke the same concept, but then he points the

Philippians to a radically different source. Rather than saying he found the solution in himself, Paul points to something – to someone, really – beyond himself, as the source of his contentment. As one commentator puts it, Paul does not promote “self-sufficiency” here, but “Christ-sufficiency.” Paul does not have confidence in finding contentment within himself, but by looking outside of himself, to another. [Fee, 431-432, 434; Fee, 432 n.37]

Because Paul knows that we are not enough, in and of ourselves. We were not made to be isolated, self-contained, and self-sufficient beings. We may wish we were. We may try to be that. But it’s not who we are. And our attempts to be self-contained and self-sufficient always fail. Even our best successes in those attempts always leave us feeling empty and lonely. Because God did not design us to work that way. It’s not the kind of beings we are.

So, Paul tells us that we cannot look to our circumstances for true contentment, and we also cannot look to ourselves for true contentment.

We Must Look to Christ for True Contentment

This then brings Paul to his central point: that we must look to Christ for true contentment.

Paul says in verse 11 that he has learned in whatever situation he’s in, to be content. In verse 12 he says he has learned the secret to contentment regardless of his circumstances. And in verse 13 he indicates that that secret, that answer to contentment, is Jesus – the one who gives him strength. Jesus, the Lord, the God of the Bible – that is who Paul is referring to in verse 13.

It’s not our circumstances that can make us content, it’s not ourselves – our sunny personality, or our grit, or our self-reliance – no, the secret to contentment, Paul says here, is Jesus.

And that’s because Jesus is our Maker. And he’s made us for a relationship with him. And that’s what our hearts most deeply long for. In fact, often, when we grasp at the things of this world, thinking they will satisfy us, the hunger we’re actually feeling is for our Maker. And that’s what Jesus offers us in the gospel – by giving us himself, he offers us what our hearts most long for.

Jesus also is our Redeemer. When we sin, and feel our own failures, instead of grasping at worldly things to try to cover our ugly thoughts, and words, and deeds, Jesus offers to wash us clean, and make us pure once again.

Jesus also is our righteousness – when we feel all the ways that we fall short, all the ways we are not what we should be, rather than grasping at things or at status to try to prove our worth, Jesus offers us his righteousness, his standing before God – the status, and solid place in the universe that we truly long for.

Jesus also is our security. Where we try to store up wealth and possessions to make us safe and make us secure, Jesus offers us security in him, not only in this life, but into eternity.

Because Jesus is also our hope. Where the satisfactions of this life are fleeting, where the security of this life is always feeble, Jesus offers us satisfaction and security not just now, but into eternity – a future with him, beyond this life, that no one can take away.

Can we really be discontent if all of this is ours in Christ? Because that's the message of the gospel: that if we rest in and receive Jesus in true faith, then all of that is ours. And so, how can we be discontent, even if we lack the fleeting things of this world?

The call to find our true contentment in Jesus is a difficult one. But it's also simple. What we need to do is simply to believe more deeply what Jesus tells us is already ours in him, and then draw close to him in faith.

So: Rather than looking to our circumstances, or to ourselves, we must look to Christ for true contentment.

That's the main point that Paul makes here.

Looking to Christ for Our Contentment When in Need

And then, in verses 11 and 12, Paul applies this point to two very different kinds of situations we may face.

First, Paul tells us that that we should look to Christ for our contentment when we are in need.

He says: "I have learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. [...] I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need."

This world is not the way it's supposed to be. There is lack. There is loss. There is injustice. People lose good things that should be theirs. People go without their basic needs being met. People go hungry.

Now, we each experience different levels of loss and lack. Many of us have never experienced true and deep want. But maybe others of you have. If that's you, then you might feel like I and others here don't really understand what it's like to go through what you've gone through. And you're probably right.

But Paul probably did understand. Paul had experienced deep and serious losses. He had suffered financial want, and insecurity over where even his next meal might come from. He had experienced catastrophe and literal shipwreck. He had experienced injustice and imprisonment. He had experienced betrayal and isolation. Paul knew loss, and want, and suffering far better than I do, and far better than most of us here do.

But even so, in the midst of such losses, Paul says he knew how to be content. Because with Jesus, we can have true contentment, even when we are in need.

Because whatever we might lose in this life, whatever we might lack, we will not lose Jesus. Though no one else seems to understand or care about our plight, Jesus understands, and he cares. He knows what it's like to lose. He knows what it's like to lack. He knows what it's like to feel abandoned. He understands better than anyone. And he is with us. He is by our side. The Maker

of the world, the God of the universe understands us, and is with us, and is for us. He loves us. And his presence and his love should bring us a contentment in our bones, even if much is still not the way it should be in this life.

Christ's presence with us now is one source of contentment for us in this life. But along with it are his promises of what is still to come. Because Jesus has promised us that, one day, the want, and the lack, and the loss, and the injustice that has marred his world will one day be done away with.

Jesus will return. And he will make all things new. He will wipe away every tear, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. And we will see our God face to face – he will dwell with us. And there will be no lack. There will be no injustice. There will be no anxiety or fear. In God's eternal city – in his new heaven and new earth, we will experience true contentment in every fiber of our being. That is what awaits us. And knowing that that is to come should enable us to endure lack and loss even now – we should, in a sense, experience anticipatory contentment, knowing what God has in store for us in eternity.

The employee, who knows for sure that he has a massive bonus coming at the end of the year, can feel content with what he knows will be his, even well before the check is handed to him. And so it should be with us.

Now, this promised future does not mean that we're to make peace with injustice or oppression or want or poverty in this world now – not at all. We are still called on to help provide for those in need, and to fight the injustices of this world. But even as we fight those battles, we can do so from a place of contentment in the Lord. Even if our bellies or our bank accounts are empty, our souls can be satisfied in Christ – both in what he is to us now, and what he will be to us in eternity.

When we suffer loss and want – when we suffer injustice or catastrophe – when we are in need, Jesus can make us to be content. Because he offers deeper satisfaction for our souls than anything we may lack.

So, we are to look to Christ for contentment when we are in need.

Looking to Christ for Our Contentment When in Abundance

But finally, Paul also tells us here that we are to look to Christ for our contentment when we are in abundance. When resources abound, when we get the things we've longed for, when finances look great, when we are healthy and wealthy ... then as well, Paul tells us that we need to look to Christ for our contentment.

And this is a striking point that we can far too easily miss. Because Paul mentions here the challenge of being content in abundance, as many times as he mentions the struggle to be content in need. [Fee, 433]

In verses 11 and 12, Paul says: "I have learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need."

The fact is that a lot of people, who have a lot of things, are still very discontent. You can see it by looking at celebrity culture. You can see it by observing the lives of the rich and powerful. But honestly, it's not just a "them" problem. While many of have real and serious struggles in this life, many of us here abound in earthly blessings. That can be true in terms of our family, our community, the land that we live in, the success of our career, or the balance of our bank account. As I've shared before, if you make the median household income for Tacoma, then you are in the top 10% of the world economically. [<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/tacomacitywashington/PST045224> and <https://wid.world/income-comparator/>] Compared to the world as a whole, and human history as a whole, most of us live lives of plenty and abundance that would have been unimaginable to Paul or the Philippians. But we are not content. And that can be for a variety of reasons.

Some of us are discontent because no matter how much we have, we're always looking to the people who are one or two steps above us. We don't compare ourselves with those who have less than us, but always those who have more. And so, unless we become the most successful person on earth, in every area of life, we will always be discontent.

Others of us, don't look up at others in envy ... but we look at what we do have in worry. We recognize that we have good things ... and we are constantly fearful that we might lose them. Rather than enjoying those blessings for however long God has given them to us, rather than entrusting the future to the Lord, we are overcome by anxiety. And anxiety is not contentment. In fact, we will always be discontent unless we were to become omnipotent – unless we were to become the most powerful being in the universe ... because that's the only way to ensure that we will not lose what is ours.

Still others of us are discontent because all our dreams came true, there's nothing else out there that we really want ... but even so, the feeling of emptiness, or incompleteness remains.

In an interview that came out just a few days ago, Lin-Manuel Miranda – whose musicals like *In the Heights* and *Hamilton* have been about as successful as any Broadway musical could be – who now writes music for all kinds of movies, who really can't excel any further in his field, who can't be more famous for what he does, who will never lack in money, who has been invited to perform at the White House multiple times, and we could go on and on – in a recent interview with Josh Horowitz, Lin-Manuel Miranda shares that when he first really became famous – when he first reached what he thought would be the pinnacle of his success, what shocked him was that when he reached that level of achievement which he'd always dreamed about ... he felt the same insides as he had before.

"It didn't fix it," he says. "It didn't fix the hole in me" – "What's going on?" he found himself asking. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ENbvFA_a0o]

Even after he'd achieved all he had ever dreamed ... it didn't make him content.

This can be the most painful kind of discontentedness in abundance ... because it realizes that more stuff and more worldly blessings will not lead to contentment ... and as a result, we can be tempted to despair.

But seen rightly, that same realization might also lead us to the truth.

Because the Bible tells you that you were not designed to find true contentment in earthly blessings. Yes, you were made to live a life on this earth – and so there is a right way to desire and receive earthly blessings. But you were made, even more foundationally, to find contentment in a relationship with your Maker. As Saint Augustine reminds us, God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him.” [Augustine, I.i.1]

It’s a little like the distinction between micronutrients and macronutrients. Hear me out ... you need micronutrients to live in this life – things like vitamins and minerals. They can be good for you. But they can’t satisfy you. And you can’t live on them alone. Micronutrients alone won’t satiate you or make you feel physically content. Because your body also needs macronutrients: it needs proteins, and carbohydrates, and fats. And if you don’t have those, then you can shovel vitamin supplements into your mouth all day long, but you won’t feel satisfied. Because your body was designed to run on something far more substantive than that.

In the same way, it doesn’t matter how much stuff you accrue – how much wealth, how much health, how much comfort, how much career success, how happy and shiny your family or friends look – if you are not also looking to the Lord, the macronutrient of your soul – then you will never feel satisfied.

And many of us are experiencing this kind of dissatisfaction.

For some of you, you don’t know the Lord yet. You’re hungry for him, but maybe you don’t even know it. You keep devouring earthly blessings, like swallowing mouthfuls of supplements in the hope that they will ease your hunger, but it’s not working. But Jesus offers you the meal your heart longs for – Jesus offers you a spiritual feast that will satisfy your soul, because Jesus offers you his very self, which is what your heart was made for: to know him, and to have a relationship with him, and to be with him.

Others of you do know the Lord ... but you’re still experiencing this hunger. Because while you are feeding on the Lord a little ... you’re still trying to get most of your satisfaction in life from other things. You nibble on the Lord, you snack on the Lord ... but you’re still trying to get most of your meals from the blessings and comforts and successes of this world ... and it’s not working. You may not be spiritually starving, because the Lord is in your life ... but you’re not flourishing ... you’re not healthy.

In each case, what we need is more of the Lord. And he is not stingy. He does not withhold himself from us. He is there for us, if we would simply look to him: listen to him in his Word, speak to him in prayer, gather before him with his people, feed upon him here at his Table.

In so many ways, the Lord is with us. All we must do is taste and see that the Lord is good.

Even in abundance, you can feel content and satisfied, if you will look to Jesus above all else to fill your heart and soul. [Calvin, 124; Fee, 433 n.47]

Conclusion

This life is filled with earthly blessings ... as well as earthly loss, and earthly lack.

But whatever our circumstances may be, Paul here points us to the secret – the key – to contentment.

It's not in looking to our circumstances. It's not in looking to ourselves. But it's in looking to Jesus – to the God who has made us for himself – the One our souls truly long for.

He is right beside us. He knocks at the door of our hearts.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us turn to him again. Let us invite him in, embrace him by faith, and receive from him the satisfaction and contentment that only he can truly provide.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991.
Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. Translated by John Pringle. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1851 Translation (Reprinted 2005).
Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.
Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let's Study Philippians*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.
O'Brien, Peter T. *The Epistle to the Philippians*. NIGTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.
Wright, N.T. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.